

## Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9895

S E C R E T MONROVIA 2786

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: OVIP (KISSINGER, HENRY A.), OTRA, XA, LI

SUBJECT: SECRETARY'S TRIP TO AFRICA BIODATA ON WILLIAM R. TOLBERT, JR., PRESIDENT OF LIBERIA

REF: STATE 95877

1. THERE FOLLOWS EMBASSY'S IMPRESSIONS OF PRESIDENT TOLBERT IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS RAISED REFTEL.

A. POLITICAL POSITION IN LIBERIA. TOLBERT IS CHIEF EXECUTIVE IN A ONE-PARTY STATE WHOSE GOVERNMENT IS CHARACTERIZED BY VERY STRONG EXECUTIVE. NEITHER LEGISLATURE NOR JUDICIARY COUNTS FOR MUCH, PARTICULARLY AS RESTRAINTS ON EXECUTIVE. AS RADIO AND TELEVISION HAVE DEVELOPED, TOLBERT HAS USED THESE MEDIA, AS WELL AS THE PRESS, TO DEVELOP A KIND OF CULT OF THE INDIVIDUAL. EVERY NEWSCAST STARTS WITH AN ITEM ON PRESIDENT TOLBERT'S LATEST DOINGS, HOWEVER INCONSEQUENTIAL

OFTEN, ENTIRE BROADCASTS SUCH AS THE SUNDAY NIGHT WEEKLY NEWS ROUNDUP ARE DEVOTED EXCLUSIVELY TO TOLBERT'S ACTIVITIES. NO OTHER POLITICIAN HAS ANY REAL PUBLIC POWER POSITION; ALTHOUGH WITHIN THE PRIVACY OF GOVERNMENT, PARTY AND MASONIC HALLS, OTHERS CAN AND DO EXERCISE POWERFUL INFLUENCES. LIBERIA'S SOCIETY IS STRONGLY PATRIARCHAL, AND THE PRESIDENT IS THE PATRIARCH. MOREOVER, PRESIDENT TOLBERT IS RELATED BY BLOOD OR MARRIAGE TO PRACTICALLY ALL IMPORTANT FIGURES IN THE GOVERNMENT, AND THUS HIS PATRIARCHAL ROLE DIRECTLY SUPPORTS HIS GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY.

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B. -- IN AFRICA. TOLBERT IS ONE OF MODERATE LEADERS (LIKE

HOUPHOUET-BOIGNY OF IVORY COAST) WHO BELIEVES PROGRESS ON SOUTHERN AFRICAN ISSUES MUST COME FROM DIALOGUE RATHER THAN CONFRONTATION. TOLBERT WANTS TO BE IN VANGUARD IN RESOLUTION OF SUCH ISSUES, BUT NOT SO FAR IN FRONT AS TO BE EXPOSED. IN EARLY 1975 HE RECEIVED VORSTER IN MONROVIA BUT FOUND HIMSELF SEVERLY CRITICIZED LATER AT THE DAR ES SALAAM OAU MEETING. TOLBERT HAS NOT FOLLOWED UP ON HIS MEETING WITH VORSTER WITH ANY NEW INITIATIVE.

TOLBERT WORKS TO PROJECT AN IMAGE OF LEADERSHIP NOT ONLY IN AFRICA, BUT ALSO ON THE WORLD SCENE AS A SPOKESMAN FOR THE THIRD WORLD. HE IS SCHEDULED TO BECOME CHAIRMAN OF THE OAU WHEN LIBERIA HOSTS THE OAU SUMMIT IN 1979. HE MAINTAINS PARTICULARLY CLOSE RELATIONS WITH SIERRA LEONE'S SIACA STEVENS AND IVORY COAST'S HOUPHOUET-BOIGNY. TOLBERT WORKS HARD AT MAINTAINING A DEGREE OF WARMTH WITH GUINEA'S SEKOU TOURE TO OVERCOME LONG STANDING MUTUAL SUSPICIONS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES. HE ENVISIONS HIMSELF AS AN ARBITER AND NEGOTIATOR. HE HAS ON A NUMBER OF OCCASIONS OFFERED HIS SERVICES IN THIS RESPECT OR SHOWN WILLINGNESS TO DO SO, E.G. HIS JANUARY 1976 ATTEMPT TO SERVE AS A GO-BETWEEN FOR THE REOPENING OF THE U.S. EMBASSY IN KAMPALA. ONE OF HIS FAVORITE PHRASES IS "COMPROMISE NOT CONFRONTATION".

2. PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS. PRESIDENT TOLBERT, WHO STANDS ABOUT 5'6", NORMALLY RECEIVES OFFICIAL VISITORS IN HIS OFFICE SITTING BEHIND A DESK ON AN ELEVATED THRONE-LIKE CHAIR. HIS VISITORS ARE USUALLY RANGED IN FRONT OF THE DESK IN CHAIRS ARRANGED IN RANKS OF FOUR. A BAPTIST MINISTER (FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE BAPTIST WORLD ALLIANCE), TOLBERT IS A SMOOTH BUT DIRECT TALKER. HE SPRINKLES HOMELY BUT APT APHORISMS IN HIS REMARKS. TOLBERT IS AN INTELLIGENT AND SINCERE MAN TRYING HARD TO FORCE THE PACE OF HIS COUNTRY'S DEVELOPMENT. HE HAS PLENTY OF SELF-CONFIDENCE AND NO OBSERVABLE DIFFIDENCE. A RATHER EMOTIONAL MAN, HE HAS A SHARP TEMPER BUT GENERALLY MANAGES TO CONTROL IT. ALTHOUGH WITH HIS OWN PEOPLE HE IS SOMETIMES SHARP AND OVERBEARING, HE IS WITH GUESTS INVARIABLY GENIAL, AND SOMETIMES DISARMINGLY FRANK ABOUT THE PROBLEMS HE FACES.

3. POLITICALLY, TOLBERT CLEARLY IDENTIFIES HIMSELF WITH THE THIRD WORLD. RECOGNIZING THAT LDC'S CAN EXERCISE GREATER INFLUENCE BY UNIT-

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ING IN A COMMON FRONT, TOLBERT IS AMONG THE MORE MODERATE OF THIRD WORLD LEADERS. HE STRESSES THE NEED FOR NEGOTIATED AND STEADY PROGRESS ON ISSUES OF THIRD WORLD CONCERN RATHER THAN ENCOURAGING RADICAL CONFRONTATION WITH THE INDUSTRIAL COUNTRIES OF THE WEST. HE ASPIRES TO A LEADERSHIP POSITION AMONG THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES. HE BELIEVES THAT LIBERIA MUST ALWAYS END UP ON THE SIDE OF THE MAJORITY IN OAU ON AFRICAN MATTERS, EVEN IF IT REQUIRES REVERSAL OF PREVIOUSLY ADOPTED POSITIONS. THIS HAS BEEN MANIFESTED RECENTLY BY GOL

RECOGNIZING THE MPLA AND DERECOGNITION OF ISRAEL, BOTH OF WHICH HAPPENED AFTER MAJORITY OF OAU HAD DONE SO AND HE ADVANCED THIS AS A PART OF HIS REASON FOR SO DOING.

TOLBERT OPENLY ADMIRES THE UNITED STATES AND AMERICAN SOCIETY. ALTHOUGH HE WILL OCCASIONALLY DEMONSTRATE TO THE WORLD THAT LIBERIA IS NOT A US SATELLITE, HE BELIEVES THAT THE UNITED STATES OWES ASSISTANCE TO LIBERIA AS A MATTER OF HISTORICAL OBLIGATION. ALTHOUGH LIBERIA WAS NEVER AN AMERICAN COLONY THE UNITED STATES IS REGARDED AS A FORMER METROPOLE, ALBEIT ONE THAT DID LITTLE TO DEVELOP LIBERIAN INFRASTRUCTURE. ALTHOUGH DESIROUS OF IMPROVING RELATIONS WITH EASTERN BLOC COUNTRIES AND TO ACCEPT DEVELOPMENT AID FROM ANY SOURCE, THE PRESIDENT IS SUSPECT OF AND CAUTIOUS WHEN DEALING WITH COMMUNIST COUNTRIES. HE BELIEVES THAT MANY LIBERIANS ARE NOT YET SUFFICIENTLY POLITICALLY SOPHISTICATED TO DEAL WITH THE SOVIETS. HE HAS NOT YET SIGNED THE LONG-NEGOTIATED CULTURAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE USSR AND LIBERIA. TOLBERT DOES NOT WANT TO SEE SOVIET PROFESSORS OR ADVISORS IN HIS COUNTRY. TOLBERT RECOGNIZES CUBA AS A LEGITIMATE MEMBER OF THE THIRD WORLD COMMUNITY BUT DISAPPROVES OF ITS AFRICAN EXPLOITS. LIBERIA HAS RECENTLY OPENED DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH CUBA, BUT DOES NOT HAVE A RESIDENT MISSION IN HAVANA NOR IS THERE A RESIDENT CUBAN MISSION HERE.

4. BEHAVIOR IN DISCUSSIONS WITH FOREIGNERS. TOLBERT DOES NOT NORMALLY DISCUSS ISSUES IN ANY GREAT DETAIL, PARTICULARLY WHEN TALKING WITH FOREIGN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS. HE SPEAKS IN TERMS OF GENERAL PRINCIPLES, AND LEAVES DETAILED DISCUSSIONS TO HIS MINISTERS. ALTHOUGH HE SOMETIMES PHRASES HIS POINT SUBTLY, EVEN CIRCUITOUSLY, HIS POINT INVARIABLY COMES THROUGH LOUD AND CLEAR, ESPECIALLY IF IT CONCERNS ASSISTANCE TO LIBERIA. (FOR EXAMPLE, WHILE HE MIGHT NOT DIRECTLY ASK FOR ASSISTANCE, HE IS LIKELY TO SAY THAT FRIENDS HELP FRIENDS, LIBERIA NEEDS HELP, AND THE U.S. IS LIBERIA'S FRIEND.)

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